Archipelagic Confederation

Advancing Genuine Citizens' Politics through Free Assemblies and Independent Structures from the Barangay & Communities

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Introduction

Many of us will agree that in our context, democracy seems elusive. Until now, a vast number of people are in extreme poverty, deprived of basic needs and are politically marginalized. We know that poverty is caused by the uneven distribution of power where only a few can decide over critical things such as the use of natural resources and distribution of its benefits. Who among us was ever asked or consulted by the government in its program of environmental destruction which is only profited big corporations which are controlled by a few families and foreign corporations? Did the government bother to ask peasants, farmers, fishers, workers, women, youth, gays, consumers and other sectors with regard to the country's accession to the WTO and its conclusion of various bilateral agreements? Who wants E-VAT and debt payment?

The list is overwhelmingly long, proving that the democracy we have today is a farce.

The heart of the struggle of all the revolutionary efforts in our history is about making people participate in power. Part of the movement's usual rhetoric is people's participation in decision-making because without people's participation to the political exercises that directly influence every dimension of their lives, democracy will not be realized.

This document will attempt to discuss an alternative anarchist political structure that will promote people's direct participation in power and, in broad strokes, discuss the flow of political power from the bottom to the top. It is a concept that is heavily derived from the idea of Confederation advanced by libertarian author Murray Bookchin. His ideas of course are not detached from traditional anarchist movements and contemporary anarchist activists; and we believe it is significantly relevant to our current political crisis.

Confederation offers an alternative political structure based on a libertarian framework—i.e., non-hierarchical and non-statist, which is doable and applicable. It is doable compared to the 35-year old struggle of the CPP-NPA-NDF which, after taking tens of thousands of lives, delivered no concrete economic and political output to the Filipino people. More so, the alternatives being offered by mainstream leftist groups outside NDF offer no substantial difference, for they all adhere to the state and of capturing political power—an objective cannot be realised in the near future.

In the light that anarchism is exaggeratedly misunderstood, let us first discuss some fundamental principles of stateless-socialism; libertarianism and anarchism.

"Purely utopian!" That's one of the common reactions of those who do not understand the word anarchy and its alternatives. Another misconception is its affinity to chaos.

These nuisances and misinterpretations are not surprising at all. Historically, anarchism has long opposed oppressive systems and fought monarchy, oligarchy, and the totalitarianism of the state-socialists and authoritarian communists alike. It continuous to carry out the struggle to fight new forms of colonialism, capitalism and other exploitative systems that hamper the development of the humanity. Every ruling regime has its share in imputing fear and terror on the anarchist movement in order to discredit it.

It is improper to escape the fact that violence is part of the anarchist movement. Along with the nationalists and republicans, anarchists carried out terroristic methods to advance social revolution. The "Propaganda by the Deed" was meant to encourage people to act against the state and the old order by launching violent activities such as the killing of French president Sadi Carnot by Sante Jeronimo Caserio (an Italian anarchist) in 1894. Italian anarchist Michele Angiolillo also shot Canovas of Spain in 1987. Luigi Luccheni (another anarchist from Italy) stabbed Empress

Elisabeth of Austria to death in 1898, while Polish anarchist Leon Czogolsz killed US president McKinley in 1901. There were also two attempts on the life of Kaiser Wilhelm I, the first by Max Hodel on 11 May 1878, then followed by Karl Nobiling on the June 2 of the same year.

And the list is long.

These of course were used by the dominant regimes to their own advantage. In order to demonize anarchism, they shrewdly tailored it to violence and chaos. And this was even reinforced by the state socialists and authoritarian communists when the anarchist movement in Ukraine challenged the Bolshevik regime, the White Army and other foreign invaders.

Nuisances and misinterpretations are bound to occur in situation wherein power is asymmetrically distributed. The political structure that is controlled by the economic and political elite would not allow anarchism to flourish. Moreover, the country's revolutionary tradition is highly influenced by red bureaucracy which is historically hostile to anarchism.

Contrary to common misconceptions, anarchism is a theory that firmly upholds the idea of an organized world that is free for all. As Noam Chomsky once stated in an interview, anarchy is a society that is highly organized wherein many different structures are integrated such as the workplace, the community and other myriad forms of free and voluntary associations, with participants directly managing their own affairs.

Unlike the existing order where people are motivated by power, profit, private property, and individualism; anarchy on the other hand is a society that fosters mutual cooperation, solidarity and freedom from exploitation and oppression and where decisions are made by those who are directly concerned. Any form of political structure that centralizes power is totally unacceptable.

The word archipelago on the other hand recognize the geographical characteristics of the country and the very essential role of its rich natural resources that strongly influence lifestyle of its inhabitants. Myriad historical accounts indicate that the bodies of water surrounding the different islands actually connected rather than separated them from each other, and that economic, social and political activities of the inhabitants were developed due to the interconnectedness of their immediate environment.

It is also important to note that the rich natural endowments of the archipelago allow diverse cultures to flourish and develop into a heterogeneous way of life that are interlinked through mutual cooperation.

Historical context

The famous victory of Lapu-lapu against Magellan is one of the earliest symbols of resistance in the archipelago. A considerable number of his men defeated the well-armed and battle-hardened Spanish conquistadores in a low-tide battle in the shore of Mactan. One can espouse the idea of an on-going rivalry between Lapu-lapu and Rajah Humabon which Magellan used—winning the trust of the latter and he attacked the former and met his death. But one can also elaborate the idea that Lapu-lapu's group was set to defend the autonomy of their community.

Prior to the nationalist struggle, "Moro Wars" took place from 1565 to 1898 that prevented the Spaniards from subjugating the inhabitants of the southern part of archipelago. Colonizers mobilized Christianized locals to fight Muslims, thus laying the foundation of "perpetual" Christian-Muslim conflict in Mindanao.

The Philippines was one of the first Asian countries to stage a revolution against the colonialism of the West. The early phase of the Filipino struggle was initially carried out by local privileged intellectuals in the likes of Jose Rizal and Marcelo Del Pilar. The revolution was nationalistic in character, which is understandable because that time, nationalism was in the height of propagation in many parts of the world, specifically in Europe. This profoundly influenced Rizal's works and inspired the oppressed masses, culminating in armed resistance organized by Andres Bonifacio in 1896.

With the growing influence of the US combined with the simultaneous armed resistance in Cuba, the Filipino nationalist resistance was able to substantially reduce the influence of Catholic Order, and finally drove out colonial Spain. But American expansionist policy immediately took effect, as expressed through the Treaty of Paris of 1898.

Shortly after the inauguration of the First Philippine Republic in January 1899 the Filipino-American War broke-out which claimed 600,000 Filipino lives, mostly due to starvation and diseases.

The revolutionary tradition in the country was further enriched upon the arrival of Isabelo De Los Reyes in Manila in 1901 from his exile in Barcelona, Spain where he brought a collection of books including, those written by Malatesta, Proudhon, Kropotkin, Marx, Darwin, Aquinas and Voltaire. This was followed by a successful wave of protests and strikes within and around Manila that paved the way for the establishment of the Union Obrera Democratica (UOD). This marked the shift of the revolutionary struggle from a mere nationalist to an anti-imperialist one.

UOD disintegrated in 1903 and from its remains, the party upholding communism and socialism was established in 1938 and then later led the Hukbalahap guerilla movement. They were the foremost opponents of the Japanese forces prior to the reinforcement provided by the Americans. This was also the period when the revolutionary movement began to feel Bolshevik influence.

The tradition of struggle later proceeded to the establishment of the Maoist-influenced Communist Party in the late 1960s which adopted a nationalist strategy and protracted people's war. It gained enormous support from the masses; but it failed to grab power until its fragmentation into smaller party formations due to the split in 1992.

Hard facts in the current context

Indeed, the counrty's historical development has continuously enriched its revolutionary tradition, not to mention the resistance efforts outside of the national democracy movement, such as sectoral and community -based resistance and the Moro struggle, among others.

However, such richness failed to translate immediately to the interest of the people. In 1970s, the poverty rate was as high as 40 percent as compared to the current rate which is 34 to 36 percent according to National Statistical Coordination Board. This indicate marginal improvement in terms of poverty reduction effort.

Unemployment, on the other hand, is pegged 11 million while underemployment is up to 7 million. This is aggravated by the massive destruction of our natural resources due to the growth orientation of the economy and incapacity of the state to manage and to utilize it equally in a sustainable way.

Furthermore, liberalization, coupled with chronic rent-seeking practices in government offices, and the absence of a logical economic development plan, inflicted serious injury to the domestic economy which further exacerbated our deteriorating economic condition.

Another equally important issue is the marginalization of huge numbers of citizens in making decisions that directly and indirectly affects their political, social and economic lives. The existing political structure makes citizens passive, inactive and apathetic. Their political participation is reduced to routinary electoral exercises where they will occasionally choose politicians who will represent them in making and implementing policies.

We can hardly identify a historical period wherein Filipinos lived in prosperity, abundance and relative peace, except during pre-Spanish times. As described by Pigaffeta, the inhabitants of the archipelago were in perfect health and had no physical defects. He got the impression that food scarcity was not prevalent. While William Henry Scott and a host of other writers validated the presence of slavery in the archipelago during the pre-Spanish period, they never mentioned any sign of poverty among local villages.

These findings make us think that the phenomena of poverty in the Philippines occurred with the advent of Spanish colonization and coercive formation of a centralized government. Unfortunately, several studies have the tendency to conveniently pin down population explosion as the cause of poverty, thus undermining the fact that this is brought by systemic oppression. For instance, in Southern Asia, around 30 million households own no land or very little, and they represent 40% of nearly all rural households in the subcontinent. Both the African and Latin American continents, on the other hand, have similar data. Moreover, land distribution in the nations of the South favors large-scale commercial agriculture controlled by a few landowners. Ergo, poverty can be rooted socially.

The Philippines is not an exemption. In 2000, the country ranked 77 out of more than 150 countries with a poverty incidence of 34% and where the human development index (HDI) figure was 0.656. In the fishery sector alone; 80% of fisher folk households live below the poverty line, (Israel, 2004). Four primary factors are widely accepted by most of the players in the fishery sectors:

1. the low productivity of land-based resources or lack of access to land;
2. low productivity of aquatic resources due mainly to habitat destruction and stock depletion;
3. resource-use conflict, particularly in coastal waters; and
4. lack of adequate basic services delivery (i.e., health, education, shelter, infrastructures, etc.).

Though the Fishery Sector Program Report of the ADB (1993) also cited high population density in most near shore areas, this must not lead us to the conclusion that we are reaching the limit. We know for a fact that the increase of population in coastal communities is due to migration patterns. As noted by ASEAN-SEAFDEC in their technical report in 2001, households displaced in agricultural lands seek economic opportunity in coastal areas that are de facto open to anybody who want to use fishery resources. Poverty therefore is not rooted to the natural limit crisis; this is clearly brought about by structural problems, such as the distribution of wealth and the control of natural resources.

It should be clarified that the idea of carrying capacity is well recognized. This concept sets the limit of a number of organisms and non-living matter in a specific ecosystem, based on the availability of food, space and other vital materials necessary for their existence. Also, part of this is the capacity of a specific ecosystem to absorb pressure brought by extraction. But to set the record straight, the destruction of natural resources (which resulted in the death of many citizens and the loss of billions of livelihood) is not directly attributable to population. In fact, it is public knowledge that big corporations benefited from large-scale logging operations. And together with large commercial mining, this eventually led to the denudations of our forests. It should also be noted that mineral extraction is one of the notorious polluters in the coastal zone that significantly reduce fish stocks.

There is no sufficient evidence to prove that the country's population of 86 million is close to the limit imposed by carrying capacity of the ecosystems. Clearly, food production is no longer a problem. In fact, developed and even developing nations like China, India and Brazil, are extra-aggressive in bilateral and multilateral trade agreements in order to have full market-access to the economies of poor and other nations where they can dump their huge surplus. In our case, the best available data on poverty is highly attributable to low agricultural and fishery productivity and poor economic performance; and this that can be directly traced to government negligence, incompetence, irresponsibility and non-accountability. Poverty is caused by unemployment; lack of land to till; degradation of natural resources; lack of economic opportunity; lack of social services, corruption and absence of a logical economic development agenda.

The huge profits being produced through massive extraction of natural resources do not deliver anything concrete to the people. We have enough sources of food to feed the entire population due to the highly abundant natural resources of the archipelago. But our finite resources are totally limited to fuel economic growth or to sustain the greed for profit of the elite.

With this conviction, we should be reminded that in order to establish a society that is free, equitable and rational, capitalism must be abolished and oppressive hierarchical political systems should be replaced by a system where citizens are highly involved in all political exercises, specifically in decision-making.

The Logic of Centralizing Power

By the sixteenth century, the state was described as a "large-scale governmental organisation effectively centralized by means of strictly secular bureaucracy, often implemented by some kind of representative body." Since economic activities profoundly influence the operations of centralized governments, the state's definition continuously evolved, but its original nature did not and will not change—i.e., to concentrate power and its desire to increase inexorable sovereignty. Theoretically, political power resides only in the state, but complete concentration of power is impossible. That is why it is reasonable to say that the existence of the state depends on its fairly concentrated power. Another very important consideration is that state is the only institution that can use legitimate violence to those who do not recognize its hegemony.

The hierarchical nature of the state inevitably creates a bureaucracy that concentrates governance and decision-making in a few representatives, akin to the institutional arrangement of the red bureaucracy, corporate structures as well as churches' organigram. A handful of representatives will not constitute a democracy; on the contrary, it is nothing but the rule of a few.

Democracy will only be realized through meaningful and substantial participation of the people in politics to which they can relate, understand, appreciate, contribute, perform, benefit and share duties and responsibilities.

The question is, how are we going to involve ordinary people in political exercises if they do not have any interest in engaging politics?

Such disinterest can be possibly rooted to the notion that the current political affair cannot offer anything to the people. All are reduced to promises and texts. For the common people, politics require complicated technical skills and knowledge that can only be earned in prestigious and expensive universities. Such an undertaking requires technical jargon and an expensive outfit which gives the impression that politics is an enterprise solely for the educated and rich families. The term polis, as we trace it back to the tradition of the Greeks, refers to the management of the community by the citizens. This is apparently lost its meaning due to statism that turned politics into a career and lucrative profession that marginalized ordinary people.

Our effort in imagining alternatives beyond the politics of the state will be facilitated by regaining the lost meaning of "politics" and calibrating it in our own context.

Libertarian Alternatives

Anarchist alternatives which were precisely reflected in the October 1917 Revolution were characterized by spontaneity and the self-organized revolt of the masses. Powerful united fronts of various forces developed and crushed the oppressive Tsarist regime within three days. The massive unrest of the people and other heterogeneous elements led to the abolition of old regime without any particular alternative and without instruction from any group. The majority of the masses did not directly articulate the ideas espoused by the anarcho-syndicalists, but what the people had done was exactly what the Anarcho-syndicalists had in mind. Upon the abolition of Tsarist state, the people spontaneously organized themselves. In Kronstadt, houses were socialized through the house committees which extended to the entire streets that resulted in the creation of street and block committees. The same thing happened in Petrograd. The factory committees that appeared almost out of nowhere were geared toward establishing "Producer Consumer Communes".

During the Spanish Civil War, the eastern part of Spain was under the influence of the anarchist movement. Workers' direct management took place in industrial and commercial establishments through the 2,000 collectives in Catalonia. In February 1937, 275 peasants and farm workers' collectives with a total of 80,000 members were formed in Aragon near the front line, which occupied vast lands which were abandoned by their landlords. In three months time, these collectives increased to 450, with a total number of 180,000 members.

There are a lot of experience worth citing in Latin America, Asia and Africa; but these are poorly articulated and are seldom mentioned in our history books. The anarchist movement is barely mentioned, despite of its profound influence in the early stage of Philippine nationalist resistance and early part of the anti-imperialist struggle in the archipelago.

Direct Democracy

Direct democracy is not a new idea. This was and is still being practiced in many parts of the world. But this concept is poorly explored due to the "power hungry" behavior of the political and economic elite and some leftists who actually advocate and practice authoritarianism.

To refresh our minds, the original Greek meaning of politics came from the word polis, which entails that the people directly formulate public policies through face-to-face processes called assemblies which are based on the ethics of complementarity and solidarity. Of course, the idea was not perfect because the citizens who had the privilege to participate in community management were those who owned slaves and had the luxury of time. But the tradition of direct democracy was evidently workable.

Confederal structures have appeared in history time and again, like those of the 16th century Spanish Communeros and the American town meetings which even reached New England and Charleston in the 1770s. This also includes the Parisian sectional assembly during the 1790s, and which occurred again in 1871 in Paris Commune, and so on.

Instead of organizing a party, why do we not go back to the communities and localities? Political parties can easily claim that they have an organized network and mass base in the local level, which we will not try to refute. Our concern will focus on the kind of politics that they are employing. Their organizational set-up is inherently top-down due to the representation system wherein a few individuals from the party would represent the interests of the entire nation. This breeds bossism wherein a few people are in the apex of the hierarchy. Moreover, they have authority vis-à-vis to their members which will eventually, end in a leader-and-led relationship. Hence, people become simple members. Instead of having active, creative, imaginative and dynamic citizens, we have passive and mechanized constituents whose duty is reduced to attendance in mobilizations and routinary selection of leaders that merely reinforces the culture of obedience.

Democracy is not about making obedient followers. It is not about imposing uniform rules to a complex and diverse population in terms of their interests, views, way-of-life, prejudices, economic activities, social and natural environment, culture and spiritual life. Rather, democracy is about creating a political atmosphere which is participatory and inclusive of this highly diverse population, and which is based on the actual needs and interests of the communities.

We do not intend to undermine the initiative of political parties when it comes to advancing the interests of the community. But perhaps it is plausible to think that since leftist parties are only among the minority, they should strive more to gain political value and leverage so that they mobilize the people. Their interest therefore is not necessarily identical with those of the communities or localities since the latter are characterized by their diversity. Traditionally, leftist parties are class-based and have a great tendency to overlook other sectors and groups who are also exploited and are significant in number. This approach often fosters elitism upon the glorified class.

In a broad sense, direct democracy will be applied by organizing free assemblies at the local level. People's organizations that are based on their nature such as peasants, fishers, women, youth, indigenous people, vendors, tricycle drivers, jeepney drivers, homeless, gays, neighborhood associations, religious groups and other formations at the localities should be encouraged to organize themselves.

Based on experience, people will surely participate in political processes if the topic to be discussed is directly related to their interests; to their daily activities and to the immediate and strategic needs of the communities. People will conduct face-to-face meetings at the barangay level to tackle their immediate concerns; they will share ideas, duties and responsibilities to address their issues in relation to other barangays. They are encouraged to engage in discussions and debates on public facilities using their own language and the existing local mechanisms to facilitate local political mechanisms.

Obviously, an ideal political structure should not mobilize people for the purpose of elevating the political value of certain political parties for elections or for the goal of taking political power which, in a sense, would merely reinforce the inactivity of their constituents. This kind of political structure will bring the political arena at the very doorstep of the people; this will create a political atmosphere that encourages the citizens' active, creative, imaginative and dynamic participation.

The ultimate direction of this process is to empower the vast number of marginalized citizens from below. This politics is educative since it will enhance the people's capacity to democratically discuss, decide, formulate and implement plans with regard to their common resources and own affairs.

Confederation

In general, the pre-Hispanic barangays were interdependent but loosely federated. Among their bases of interaction were trade, commerce and war (raids for slaves and wives and revenge). "Highly" federated barangays were usually found in river mouths or wherever the ports were strategically located for commerce and where economic activities were high. This is not to romanticize the idea of the baranganic system but rather to trace our traditional practice of decentralism that actually proved to be far more humane than the statist model that was imposed by that colonialists and that is still in place until today.

Our idea of decentralization here should not be mistaken as parochialism which might lead to the isolation of the locality from the rest of world. Confederalism as defined by Murray Bookchin "is above all a network of administrative councils whose members or delegates are elected from popular, face-to-face democratic assemblies". In our context, structures will be independently organized from barangay or community level. Every barangay or community assembly will elect delegate/s whose function is purely administrative, such as transmitting information and other practical functions. Policy-making will take place strictly at the popular assemblies in the barangay and in community level. Delegates have no power to decide and they are totally recallable and accountable to the assemblies that mandated them. More importantly, delegates posses no privilege and authority over the citizens.

Confederal councils comprised of substantial delegates will be organized at the municipal and city level; then municipalities and cities will be confederated at the provincial level. The regional level will then comprise the Archipelagic Confederation. A confederation is a structure that connects and interlink politically and economically every community of the archipelago, and where the functions are administrative and coordinative. The ultimate idea of confederation is to integrate all social structures, not in a hierarchical or top-down orientation, but rather vice-versa. Public policies will be formulated from the grassroots, which will be expressed at the municipal, city, provincial, and regional levels.

The basis of integration is not competition but rather mutual cooperation, complementation and solidarity. Every sector, group and other formations in a municipality will find their place in production processes to ensure the needs of the communities.

We cannot blame groups inclined to party system and statist model if they immediately express a low appreciation for the proposed alternative system. Indeed, taking political power is a short cut to institute desired changes; but such changes are not necessarily meaningful for those who did not participate in the seizure of political power. In many instances, the great bulk of masses are reduced into mere spectators to the political exercise initiated by the few, again making passive, inactive and obedient constituents.

True, this process is strategic because it also involves changing the behavior of people who are highly influenced by the dominant institutions that promote and reinforce an order based on competition, individualism and imposed uniformity. As part of processes that resist the current order and the behavior that reinforces it, direct democracy can be employed. In the heist of the brutal effect of grow-or-die market capitalism and a corrupt centralized state, communities should persistently defend their own physical and social space by defining its specific interests in connection to larger communities. We should encourage locals to self-organize and maximize their traditional networks to protect and advance the interests of their localities in relation to the interests and needs of other communities.

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